

## Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies

Est 1998. Published by Social Care Ireland

---

Volume 2  
Issue 1 *Spring, 1999*

---

1999-01-01

### A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population in Third Level Education.

Pat McGarthy  
*Athlone Institute of Technology*

Dermot Duffy  
*Athlone Institute of Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass>

---

#### Recommended Citation

McGarthy, Pat and Duffy, Dermot (1999) "A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population in Third Level Education.," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.

doi:10.21427/D7GM95

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol2/iss1/6>

***A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population in  
Third Level Education***

**A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population  
in Third Level Education.**

**Pat McGarthy & Dermot Duffy, Department of Business and Social  
Studies, Athlone Institute of Technology, Athlone, Ireland**

---

**Address for Correspondence: Mr. P. McGarthy, Department of Business  
and Social Studies, Athlone Institute of Technology, Athlone, Ireland**

### **Abstract**

The pursuit of knowledge and the availability of an educational qualification has always been an aspiration of most citizens in developed and less developed economies worldwide. In modern Ireland, the educational system has prided itself as one of the more advanced models *vis-a-vis* student quality and educational participation structured and quality educational population. Eighty per cent of Irish school children now sit their Leaving Certificate, and there has been a fivefold increase in third level enrolments over the last thirty years. Despite such admirable statistics, large levels of socio-economic deprivation still exist in our third level education, so much so that a child of a professional has seven times greater chance of attending third level education than the child of an unskilled manual worker.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss research regarding socio-economic analysis of student population in third level education. Past research by Professor Patrick Clancy of University College Dublin, one of the most foremost authorities on the area, is discussed along with the latest research by Mr. Dermot Duffy and Mr. Patrick McGarty from Athlone Institute of Technology. Duffy and McGarty's research compares the university sector with the Institute of Technology sector (formerly RTC sector). The survey covered all categories in the old RTC sector, now Institute of Technology (IT) sector,

## *A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population in Third Level Education*

and did not include Dublin Institute of Technology, Colleges of Education and NCAD. From raw data, categories recorded as unknown were eliminated. While it was beyond the remit of the paper to discuss causes and solutions to the problem, the paper concludes with a brief discussion of both areas.

In modern Irish society, education occupies a fundamental cornerstone of social and economic development. Clancy (1998) states "such has been the transformation that increasingly education is being viewed as a form of cultural capital or knowledge based capital which is analogous to economic capital. The operational measure of this capital is the amount and quality of educational qualifications which one possesses". Since the 1960's a major transformation has taken place which has resulted in major expansions in numbers attending full time education, most notably in the second and third level sectors. This has been partly brought about by the provision of free second level education and the expansion of the third-level sector with the formation of the regional technical colleges, now institutes of technology. Increased participation in education has resulted in 80% of Irish school children now remaining in school to sit their Leaving Certificate, and an increase in third-level enrolments from 20,698 in 1965 to 102,662 in 1995.

Associated with this increased educational opportunity, large scale structural changes contributed to social mobility. Inheritance has decreased significantly

as a determinant of social status with a reduction in young people entering family employment. A social analysis of the Irish professional and managerial sector of the 1980's and 1990's reveals that this is no longer a homogenous group determined by birth into a particular socio-economic class, but a relatively disparate group by class origin. Large scale social mobility across class groups is a direct result of structural change which has resulted in the modernisation and industrialisation of Irish society. Few will argue that this economic and social transformation would ever have occurred without expansion of the Irish education system. Education and the holding of educational qualifications is now the currency for employment and it is the lack of such qualifications that are the major contributors to poverty and social deprivation. The Irish economy is no longer providing large numbers of unskilled manual jobs as it did in the 1960's, and as a result the consequences of not attaining educational qualifications are more severe. Whelan (1994) states that households that are exposed to unemployment and poverty are also the source of those school leavers who come on the labour market each year totally lacking qualifications. Without an educational qualification there is an increasing risk of exposure to poverty and the direct correlation between class origin and educational qualifications is well documented. Clancy (1994) notes that a child of a higher professional is seven times more likely to attend third level education than a child of an unskilled manual worker. Almost 70% of children from lower working class backgrounds attained no educational qualification compared to less than 10% from professional and managerial

backgrounds. In the Ireland of the 1990's the poor are predominantly poorly educated and 75% of poor households are headed by a person with no educational qualifications.

### **Socio-Economic Statistics 1**

The monitoring of socio-economic inequalities in access to higher education in Ireland, which commenced with the *Investment in Education* (1965) report, has been the focus of systematic research by Professor Patrick Clancy of University College Dublin, in successive national surveys. Clancy's 1992 research, published in 1995, found large disparities by socio-economic group. Thirty-eight percent of higher education entrants came from the four highest socio-economic groups (higher professional, lower professional, employers and managers and salaried employees), although these groups constituted less than 21% of the relevant population. In contrast, the five lowest socio-economic (other non-manual, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual, and other agricultural occupations) were seriously under-represented; 35% of entrants came from these groups although they constituted almost 56% of the relevant age cohort. The farmers' group was also over-represented; while they made up only 12% of the relevant age cohort, they accounted for almost 17% of entrants to higher education. The final group, intermediate non-manual, was marginally under-represented among higher education entrants.

Notwithstanding the persistence of high levels of socio-economic group inequality, a comparison of Clancy's 1992 findings with those undertaken by him in 1980 and 1986 reveal a significant reduction in inequality. During a time of expanding enrolments, it is no surprise to find that most socio-economic groups experienced an increase in the proportion going on to higher education. For the four highest socio-economic groups the proportion going was in excess of a half in 1992 and for the higher professional group it was 89%, having risen from an estimated two-thirds in 1980. All of the under-represented socio-economic groups experienced an increase in the proportion entering higher education. For the other non-manual and skilled manual groups it had risen from 9% in 1980 to 26% by 1992, while for the combined groups of unskilled and semi-skilled manual it had increased from 5% in 1980 to 14% in 1992.

In addition to documenting overall levels of selectivity in higher education, Clancy's three national surveys have shown how this is complemented by further selectivity by sector and field of study. The more prestigious the sector and field of study, the greater the social inequality in participating levels. Within the university sector, the higher professional groups had their strongest representation, while students from working class backgrounds had their lowest representation in this sector. There was further differentiation within the university with the higher professional group being especially strongly represented within the faculties of architecture, medicine and law, while the semi-skilled and unskilled manual groups had their highest proportionate

### ***A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population in Third Level Education***

representation in education and social science. In contrast, while there continues to be disparities between the socio-economic groups in the pattern of access to the RTCs, the degree of inequality was significantly less than in the other sectors. All of the manual socio-economic groups had their highest representation in this sector. This has also been supported by the most recent analysis of the third-level sector by Duffy and McGarty (1998) covering the years up to and including the 1997/98 academic year.

Clancy's analysis of increased participation by certain groups has been disputed somewhat by Breen (1994) who claims that each sector benefited equally. Breen claims that the reduction in class differentials that did occur was the outcome of expansion of places available in the third-level sector rather than a diminution in the influence of class in the selection process. Halsey (1980) and Heath and Clifford (1990) claim that children from working class origins tend to benefit from educational expansion as the take up from other classes moves towards saturation. Expansion according to Goldthorpe and Hannon (1992) causes the education system to become less selective with consequent benefits for less advantaged groups, but where selection continued to be important, class effects remained undiminished.



## **Socio-Economic Statistics 2**

The latest research on access to third level education by Duffy and McGarty (1998) reveals continuous minimum participation by children from lower socio-economic groups. In the Republic of Ireland, in the 1996/97 academic year, only 4% of first year students in the Institutes of Technology and 1% of first year students at University level came from parents who are classed as unskilled manual workers. This compares to 18% of farmers children who entered the IT sector and 15% the University sector. For the same period, students from the Professions and Employers/Self-employed/Managers socio-economic groups constituted nearly 50% of first year entrants in the University sector and 28% in the IT sector. Again if one makes a comparison the results are quite startling - 2.6% of first year students come from parents with an unskilled/semi-skilled background in the university sector and 11 % of the same group constitute first year students in the IT sector (see tables).

While the research of Clancy (1995) and Duffy and McGarty (1998) demonstrate that the IT sector consistently educates more children from lower socio-economic groups (see tables A and B), an interesting aspect to the latest research is that both the university and IT sectors are now attracting students from each others traditional domains (see tables C, D and E). Children from Professional/Employer/Managers groups are now increasingly attending institutes of Technology while children of skilled/semi-skilled workers are attending universities in increasing numbers.

The reasons for such movement are varied, but one of the most significant is the ever increasing expansion and reputation of the Institute of Technology sector. From humble beginnings with only two-year certificate courses on offer, the Institute of Technology sector has expanded its courses to Diploma and Degree and Postgraduate levels in the areas of Business Studies, the Humanities, Engineering and Science. Some of the reasons for increasing numbers of children from middle income backgrounds attending universities include ever increasing course expansion and parental aspirations for a child to attend university.

### **The Way Forward?**

To find solutions to any problem, one must first examine the causes. The vast majority of the twenty per cent of Irish children who never sit a Leaving Certificate and in most cases drop-out of our educational system without a qualification, come from marginalised families. One of the main reasons for drop-out is cultural, with no history of formal education in many working class families. This, combined with a lack of financial resources from the family unit to sustain a child in education at third level, contributes to low levels of participation. The very modest level of grant assistance available at third level does not make education a viable option. Often where participation does occur, the necessity to work part-time by many students leads to academic pressure

and in some cases college drop-out. Cultural barriers often manifest themselves in a situation where working class children felt alienated in educational institutions populated by a majority of middle class staff and students with middle class values.

Lynch and O’Riordan (1996) whose comprehensive interaction with community activists, school personnel and second and third level students reveals many of the reasons for minimal participation by working class school children.

The authors note “The multifaceted nature of educational disadvantage is clearly evident from the research. Three main types of barriers were identified, education specific barriers, social and cultural barriers, and in particular, financial barriers. The latter were regarded by all groups as the most significant and as having a determining effect on certain aspects of students social, cultural and educational experience” (Lynch and O’Riordan 1996)

A note of pessimism from Lynch and O’Riordan (1996) on current modes of entry to higher education notes “certainly the continuous evaluation of points for selection into higher education only exacerbates the inequality as it requires a larger and larger investment of time, energy and money to allow the same goals on behalf of both teachers, students and their families. Those with

superior resources are obviously advantaged in such a system” (Lynch and O’Riordan 1996).

It is beyond the discourse of this paper to discuss indepth solutions but proposals by authors such as Clancy (1998), Lynch and O’Riordan (1996) need to be examined. In summary these include:

- a total re-examination of the maintenance grant at third level
- income support for disadvantaged families whose children are attending second/third level education
- the development of outreach centres of third level colleges in working class areas to decrease alienation
- a co-ordinated policy by state agencies, colleges and community activists to increase participation.
- increased post entry supports (Welfare Officer etc.) at third level colleges.

In the era of the Celtic Tiger, the time is now right for the Tiger to look after some of its most disadvantaged cubs.

**References:**

Breen R (1989) *Social Class, Schools, And Society*, Dublin.

Breen, R, Hannan D, Rottman D, and Whelan C (1990) *Understanding Contemporary Ireland; State, Class And Development In The Republic Of Ireland*. London: Macmillan

Breen R, (1984) *Education And The Labour Market: Work And Unemployment Among Recent Cohorts Of Irish School Leavers*. (General Research Series, No.119, Dublin, Economic And Social Research Institute)

Clancy P, (1982) *Participation in Higher Education*. (Dublin, Higher Education Authority)

Clancy P, (1988) *Who Goes to College?* (Dublin, Higher Education Authority)

Clancy P, (1995) *Access to College: Patterns of Continuity and Change* (Dublin, Higher Education Authority)

Clancy P, (1998) Barriers to Entering Higher Education, paper presented at the Union of Students in Ireland Disadvantaged Access Conference, Dublin Castle, March 1998.

Department of Education (1995) *Charting our Education Future: white paper on education* (Dublin, Stationery Office).

Duffy D and McGarty, P (1998) Access to Education - It's the same old story, *Ireland on Sunday*, 6 December

Goldthorpe J.H. ,(1992) The Theory Of Industrialism And The Irish Case in

J.M. Goldthorpe and C.T. Whelan (EDS) *The Development Of Industrial Society In Ireland ,Proceedings Of The British Academy*,79, (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Hannan D; Shortall S (1991) *The Quality of Their Education* Dublin, The Economic and Social Research Institute).

Hout M (1989) *Following In Fathers Footsteps: Social Mobility In Ireland*. (London, Harvard University Press (1980))

Halsey A. H, Heat A. F, and Ridge J. M. (1980), *Family, Class And Education In Modern Britain*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

***A Socio-Economic Analysis of Student Population in  
Third Level Education***

Heath A.F.; Clifford, P, (1990) Class Inequalities In Education In The Twentieth Century. (Journal Of The Royal Statistical Society, Series A, 153, 1-16).

Hannan, D F, (1986) *Schooling And The Labour Market: Young People In Transition From School To Work*. (Shannon, Shannon Curriculum Development Centre).

Hannan, D.F. (1992) Ending Inequality In Education, Poverty Today, July-Sept..

Lynch K; O'Riordan C, (1996) Social Class Inequality and Higher Education - Barriers to Equality of Access and Participation among School Leavers (Dublin, University College Dublin)

Murphy C, (1996) RTC identity crisis. Press release *Irish Times: education and living supplement*, 23 April, 1996.

Technical Working Group, (1995) *Interim Report of the Steering Committee's Technical Working Group* (Dublin, Higher Education Authority).

Williams G, (1985) *Higher Education in Ireland: Co-operation and Complementary* (Dublin and Belfast, National Economic and Social Council and Northern Ireland Economic Council).

**Table A.** The breakdown by percentage and socio-economic group for the years 1992/3 to 1996/7 in the **IT** sector.

Year	Farmer	Agricultural Workers	Higher Professional	Lower Professional	Employer & Manager	Salaried Employee	Intermediate Non-Manual Worker	Other Non-Manual Worker	Skilled Worker	Semi-skilled Worker	Unskilled Manual Worker
1996/7	18.4	2.4	5.9	9.5	12.5	6.6	7.5	10.6	15.8	6.7	4.1
1995/6	19.7	1.8	5.0	8.8	12.0	6.4	7.9	10.1	16.2	7.0	5.1
1994/5	23.0	2.6	4.6	9.4	9.0	5.2	10.8	9.8	14.2	6.7	4.8
1993/4	23.1	2.0	5.8	9.7	10.1	5.2	9.6	7.2	16.5	6.5	4.3
1992/3	22.6	1.9	5.9	8.3	10.2	5.9	9.8	7.2	16.6	6.4	5.1

The two largest socio-economic groupings in the I.T. sector are farmers and skilled workers. Unskilled manual workers and agricultural workers represent the two smallest socio-economic groups.

**Table B.** The breakdown by percentage and socio-economic group for the years 1992/3 to 1996/7 in for colleges in the **University** sector.

Year	Farmer	Agricultural Workers	Higher Professional	Lower Professional	Employer & Manager	Salaried Employee	Intermediate Non-Manual Worker	Other Non-Manual Worker	Skilled Worker	Semi-skilled Worker	Unskilled Manual Worker
1996/7	15.4	1.0	15.8	14.7	18.9	7.0	8.1	5.5	11.1	1.7	0.9
1995/6	15.6	1.0	14.4	15.6	18.4	7.5	8.0	6.1	11.2	1.6	0.7
1994/5	16.6	1.3	14.6	13.9	16.9	8.7	8.1	6.2	10.9	2.0	0.9
1993/4	15.7	0.9	14.3	13.7	18.4	9.4	8.1	6.4	10.0	1.9	1.2
1992/3	15.6	1.1	14.0	13.5	18.5	10.6	8.1	5.7	10.0	1.9	1.1

Employers & Managers and Higher Professionals represent the largest grouping in the University sector. The two smallest socio-economic groupings are the Unskilled Manual Workers and Agricultural Workers, while the two smallest groupings are similar in both the university and I.T. sectors. These groupings have consistently shown higher participation rates in the I.T. sector.

**Table C.** The average percentage growth rate in the **University** intake in the 1993/4 to 1996/7 period as compared to the 1992/3 intake

Farmer	Agricultural Workers	Higher Professional	Lower Professional	Employer & Manager	Salaried Employee	Intermediate Non-Manual Worker	Other Non-Manual Worker	Skilled Worker	Semi-skilled Worker	Unskilled Manual Worker
18.1	15.6	23.3	25.5	14.6	-11.5	16.1	22.7	25.7	8.1	-1.0

All groupings have shown an increase in the 1993/4 to 1996/7 period with the exception of Salaried Employees (-11.5%) and Unskilled Manual Workers (-1.0%); Higher Professionals (23.3%), Lower Professionals (25.5%) and Skilled Workers (25.6%) represent the most significant increases.

**Table D.** The average percentage growth rate in the **IT** sector intake in the 1993/4 to 1996/7 period as compared to the 1992/3 intake

Farmer	Agricultural Workers	Higher Professional	Lower Professional	Employer & Manager	Salaried Employee	Intermediate Non-Manual Worker	Other Non-Manual Worker	Skilled Worker	Semi-skilled Worker	Unskilled Manual Worker
-3.6	17.1	-5.9	16.7	12.4	4.3	-5.3	37.9	-1.4	10.6	-7.5

Average percentage growth in the 1993/4 to 1996/7 periods as compared to 1992/3 period reveals that the largest increased group is in the non-manual category (37.9%), while the agricultural workers (17.1%), lower professionals (16.0%) and employers and managers (12.4%) groupings also show increases.



Table E. Percentage for choice of sector by socio-economic groups, each year.

Year		Farmer	Agricultural Workers	Higher Professional	Lower Professional	Employer & Manager	Salaried Employee	Intermediate Non-Manual Worker	Other Non-Manual Worker	Skilled Worker	Semi-skilled Worker	Unskilled Manual Worker
1996/7	IT	49.7	66.4	23.6	34.9	35.3	43.7	43.2	61.2	54.1	76.7	79.6
	University	50.3	33.6	76.4	65.1	64.7	56.3	56.8	38.8	45.9	23.3	20.4
1995/6	IT	49.2	58.1	21.1	30.3	33.5	39.5	43.3	56.3	52.5	76.9	84.5
	University	50.8	41.9	78.9	69.7	66.5	60.5	56.7	43.7	47.5	23.1	15.5
1994/5	IT	51.4	59.2	19.3	34.1	29.0	31.4	50.7	54.9	49.9	71.7	80.8
	University	48.6	40.8	80.7	65.9	71.0	68.6	49.3	45.1	50.1	28.3	19.2
1993/4	IT	51.2	60.6	22.4	33.3	28.2	28.2	45.8	44.2	53.9	71.2	71.8
	University	48.8	39.4	77.6	66.7	71.8	71.8	54.2	55.8	46.1	28.8	28.2
1992/3	IT	55.4	61.0	26.7	34.7	32.3	32.2	50.9	52.0	58.7	73.9	80.5
	University	44.6	39.0	73.3	65.3	67.7	67.8	49.1	48.0	41.3	26.1	19.5